MEMORANDUM

for

"Issue Voting, Cognitive Processes, and Rational Choice"

TO: Board of Overseers, National Election Studies

FROM: Richard G. Niemi
        University of Rochester.

My overall concern is that we establish more adequately than here-

tofore the nature of opinions in the general electorate. While considerable

improvements have been made in the last decade, our measurement techniques

are still very imperfect. As a consequence, absolutely fundamental questions

about the distribution of attitudes remain unanswered.

Even the most basic question--to what extent do people actually have

attitudes on specific issues--is still not settled. On the one hand we have

Converse's work which suggests (at least as popularly interpreted) that

"non-attitudes" are extremely widespread. On the other hand we have Achen's

work which suggests that attitudes in the late 50's were vastly more stable

than Converse asserted, with the implication that real attitudes must surely

have existed. Or we have the contrast between Nie and Andersen's and Pomper's

work, which suggest that people became much more attuned to politics in the

60's and 70's, and Margolis's work which suggests that people are not really

much different now than they were 20 years ago. To a certain extent, of

course, these different conclusions can be reconciled because of their dif-

fering methodologies and purposes. But there is still an underlying uncer-

tainty about whether people have attitudes, how intense they are if held,

and how changeable they are if they exist.

Given this situation I have suggestions in three areas which will go a long way toward settling these matters. The first two suggestions entail getting more information from respondents about the intensity of opinions and the salience of issues. However, these suggestions inevitably impinge on matters concerning the overall design of the study. Therefore my other major suggestion concerns study design in a more basic sense.

Intensity and Salience: Theoretical Status and Present Measurement

By intensity of opinion I refer specifically to the shape of a utility function over an issue space. By salience I mean an individual's subjective judgment about the importance of an issue to him or her. Both intensity and salience are extremely important in the context of voting studies. It is likely, for example, that both of these factors are involved in the relationship between opinions and vote direction. They are also related to the degree of persistence or change of attitudes. They are both linked to questions of ideology. And they are undoubtedly correlated with each other, although they can be distinguished both theoretically and empirically. These connections are all relatively straightforward, so I will not discuss them further here. (For example, it is likely that an opinion held very intensely will be more stable than an opinion held only weakly.) However obvious the connections may seem, though, we are currently unable to test for their strength or even verify their existence.

Beyond the relationships just mentioned, intensity of opinions and salience of issues are important if we are seriously interested in studying issue-voting in the context of rational choice models. At least I feel very strongly that this is the case. Some people, I believe, see only a cari-

cature of rational choice models. In these caricatures everyone in the electorate is knowledgeable about their own opinions and about candidates' stands on issues, all opinions are important, and opinions don't change during an election campaign. While it may be true to a great extent that existing mathematical models contain one or more of these assumptions, I do not think for a moment that most rational choice theorists believe this to be an accurate representation of the electorate. We know from empirical work that there is limited information both about candidates' and about individuals' own positions, that opinions do change over the course of campaigns as well as between elections, and that some issues are more important than others in determining voting behavior. Thus proper testing of rational choice models and even their further development, depends on the collection of adequate data about intensity of opinions and salience of issues.[1]

The final general point that should be made is that intensity and salience are not adequately measured at the present time. Utility functions of individuals go virtually unmeasured. All that is derived is "ideal points," such as the respondent's position on a seven-point scale.[2] Saliency is gotten at only through the questions about most important problems (1976 post-election inteview, pp. 12-13), and these questions are not tied in to the specific issues that are raised elsewhere in the interview.

---

[1]One can argue that theorists are willing to make assumptions that are only approximations of reality. My point is that they usually want to avoid assumptions that are patently false.

[2]There are rare exceptions such as questions H8-8b (about military spending) in the 1976 pre-election interview or question E1 (about busing). But these questions differ in format from one another, have not been used at all in connection with the seven-point scales, and are few in number.

Therefore, some improvement in measurement in this area is clearly needed.

Intensity of Opinions (Utility Functions): Specific Suggestions

The most obvious and straightforward procedure for gathering information about intensity would be to ask respondents something like "How strongly do you feel about your position on this issue?", with the responses running from "very strongly" to "not very strongly." However, I think that a much better procedure can be developed. Although it would clearly take a good deal of experimentation, I think it may actually be possible for respondents to draw pictures of their utility curves. Obviously one could not use words such as "utility curves" in the questionnaire. However, one might have respondents draw a vertical line indicating how strongly they feel about their first preference, then draw two more lines for the points on either side of their most preferred position, two more for the next closest points, and so on.[3]

One could actually extend the same principle to gathering information about the certainty with which individuals place other individuals and groups along a seven-point scale. However, I think that it would be best to begin by simply trying to obtain intensity of individual opinions and only later extend it to certainty of location of other individuals and groups.

Other possibilities also exist. One could, for example, have individuals assign numbers or words to various positions on a dimension to indi-

---

[3]This procedure more or less assumes that individuals' preferences are single-peaked. Respondents could draw vertical lines that would indicate a non-single-peaked preference, but I think it unlikely that they would do so even if their preferences were in fact multi-peaked. See below on non-single-peaked preferences.

cate their feeling about that alternative. I suspect, however, that this procedure would be too time consuming. One might also try to probe the bounds of acceptability. By this I mean attempting to determine which set of alternatives would be "acceptable" to a respondent even if not most preferred. On a spending dimension, for example, I might be willing to spend anywhere from five to twenty-five thousand dollars for a particular program, but spending less than $5000 would not produce meaningful results and would therefore be unacceptable, which spending more than $25,000 would surely be wasteful and therefore unacceptable.

Wherever non-single-peaked preferences seem likely--which is probably on a minority of issues--it would be appropriate to try to determine the shape of utility curves prior to determining their height at particular points. The classic case, of course, is attitudes on the Vietnam war, on which some people evidently had an "all-or-nothing" opinion. In cases such as this it would probably be necessary to develop a question sequence which asked for one's position on the issue, then asked for one's second highest preference. One could, in fact, continue this process to develop an entire preference ordering over a set of alternatives.

Such a procedure would be very time consuming. However, pre-testing could be used to determine whether there were more than a few individuals with non-single-peaked preferences. In the event that there were only a few such individuals, one could simply ignore them. If the number was significant, one still might avoid obtaining complete preference orderings by asking for first, second, and last choices. After determining these alternatives, one might then combine this with my first suggestion to obtain at least a partial drawing of a utility curve.

I think that all of these suggestions are feasible, though considerable developmental work would have to be undertaken. As I have pointed out previously (Public Choice, 1974), one difficulty is that questions to determine the shape of utility functions would be redundant (event to the point of seeming silly) for individuals with strictly single-peaked preferences. However, my suggestion to obtain partial preference maps might alleviate this problem. Obtaining any additional information about intensity of opinions would also entail added questions and longer interviews. However, my suggestions below for changes in design would help overcome this problem.

Salience of Issues: Specific Suggestions

Here my major point is that we need to obtain salience information with respect to most or all of the issues raised in the questionnaire. Instead of asking simply about the salience of one or two issues or asking about "most important" problems without referring to any specific issues, I think that it is necessary to obtain some salience information about each and every issue raised.

What salience measure is used is important, but I think there are several available options. One could use simply a numerical scale similar to the seven-point scale used in 1976 to determine political support (pre-election interview, p. 39). Generally speaking, I am sympathetic with this procedure. However, at least one difficulty is that by itself it doesn't produce adequate comparisons among issues. That is, a respondent might give a #7--extremely important--to two issues and yet regard one as more important than the other.

This difficulty suggests several alternative procedures. One possibility is to combine the numerical rating just referred to with an open-ended question about most important problems similar to that currently used. Probably a better procedure is to obtain ratings for each issue as it comes up, and then, after all issues are exhausted, to repeat them and ask the respondent to rank-order them from most-to-least important. A slight variant would have the respondent indicate more and less important problems using a series of paired comparisons.

There are still other variations on these procedures. One could delay asking salience questions until respondent positions on all issues had been obtained. Then one could take all issues at once and have respondents rate their importance (say on a scale of 1 through 20).[4] Alternatively, one could do the same thing except let individuals draw vertical lines to indicate salience instead of using numbers.

As with intensity, experimentation is required to determine the best procedures. But the main point is to use one or more of these methods to obtain salience measures for all issues included in the questionnaire.

Study Design

My first suggestion is that the design of the study be altered to include a multi-wave pre-election panel. The reason I support this alteration is that I am convinced that opinions are much more changeable—and yet not

---

[4] This would be akin to obtaining a preference ordering since with this procedure individuals would probably use 20 or some other high number for the most important issue, a slightly lower number for the next most important issue, and so on. However, it would easily accommodate ties and would also yield information about differences between ranks.

random opinions—than much of the previous literature has suggested. Jennings'

and my work with the panel study between '65 and '73 (British Journal of

Political Science, forthcoming) shows that individual rates of change were

quite high and yet appeared to be related to political events. Moreover,

it seems to me that much of the emphasis in socialization work of recent

years has suggested this same point (see for example, my review in the

Annual Review of Sociology, 1977). If this is true we need to determine the

nature of those changes and to get a better handle on the reasons for such

changes.

If I am wrong, of course, we will not know this either unless we have

information from a panel study. Our 1965-1973 panel and the 1972-74-76

panel are useful in this respect. However, there are advantages to short-

term panels as well as to these longer-term panels. For example, long-term

panels are not ideal for determining reliability of questions. Enough changes

occur in the political world over a two-year period that it is almost im-

possible to determine whether changes are real or simply a product of

question unreliability. Shorter term panels, especially of the variety I

suggest below, would be a considerable improvement in this regard.

Another reason for suggesting a pre-election panel is that it would

increase the actual amount of interviewing. This is absolutely essential

if additional questions are to be added on anything—intensity, salience,

or anything else.[5] Multiple interviews would solve this problem nicely,

---

[5]An alternative would be to cut some information from the questionnaires,
but judging from past experience, this seems nearly impossible. In any
event, it seems unlikely that a sufficient amount could be cut to add
very many questions.

while simultaneously shortening each interview. (The interviews are
getting sufficiently long that respondent fatigue may become a real problem
if anything more is added.)

While suggesting a multi-wave panel study, I do not simply suggest re-
interviewing the entire sample three, four, five or more times prior to the
election. If nothing else, this would be extraordinarily expensive. A
much better procedure would be to use overlapping panels in the manner des-
cribed by Kish (Survey Sampling, pp. 471-74). Essentially this procedure
means that a random subsample would be interviewed, say, at times one,
three and five, another subsample would be interviewed only at times one
and five, yet another subsample would be interviewed at times one, two and
five, and so on.

The primary advantage of this procedure is that it would yield increased
interviewing time without being prohibitively expensive. But it would also
have other advantages. For example, overlapping panels would be an optimal
design for determining question reliability since selected subsample(s)
could be interviewed after a very short interval (perhaps one week). It
would also help us study contamination effects since the length of time
between interviews could be controlled and made use of (both in interviewing
and subsequent analysis). Reliability of recall questions could be more
adequately determined from an overlapping design. And time sampling
(Kish, pp. 474-77) would be a possibility.[6]

Designing an overlapping panel would be quite a complicated task.

---

[6]Time sampling—random selection of time segments from a specified interval—
would probably be highly useful for studying media effects, especially if
it were combined with collection of data about the media themselves.

Presumably one would not have to ask some questions (such as demographic information) more than once. But other questions might be asked every time the respondent was interviewed. Still other questions might be asked only at widely-spaced intervals. Some questions might be asked in different formats in different interviews. And, of course, supervising such a study would be no mean feat. Nonetheless, the advantages of an overlapping panel, combined with the savings over a full replication for each wave, make this an extremely efficient use of resources.

Bonus Section: An Added Suggestion

An idea which I find exciting is to add an extra subset of respondents to be reserved for innovative work. My suggestion would be that, say, 200 respondents be designated for this—enough that there be a few respondents in each of the Center's primary sampling units. If the terms of support from NSF make it possible, I would use this set of respondents as a device to encourage the submission of new proposals. That is, there could be a competition each two or four years for the right to be the chief determinant of the questions used for these respondents. By making it competitive I would hope that it would continually be used for the best of the new ideas that come along.

The guidelines for these proposals could be extremely wide. One year the chief characteristic might be the use of questions about a particular substantive area. Another year it might be a methodological study. Another year it might be some combination of the two. To be useful, of course, the Board of Overseers, or some other independent group, would have to be the judges for such a competition.

This idea would, in a responsible way, truly open up the Center's study to the entire political science community.